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JPRS: 3249
16 May 1960

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SABOTAGE OPERATIONS OF THE PREWAR ANTI-FASCIST LEAGUE

- Poland -

by Rajmund Szubanski

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FOREWORD

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SABOTAGE OPERATIONS OF THE PREWAR ANTI-FASCIST LEAGUE
(Connection with the Communist Party, the International
Seamen's and Dockers' Unions; Its Organization,
Operations, personalities)

Following is a translation of the article "Ships Are Sinking"
by Rajmund Szubanski in the Polish periodical Morze (The Sea),
No. 3, March 1960, Warsaw, page 7₁/

In autumn 1941 the press in the neutral countries printed a short news item: "In Brementhafen /sic/ a fire broke out on the passenger ship "Bremen", which was recently transformed into a cargo. Despite the efforts of many firemen squads, the fire could not be put out. The great ship burned like a torch. The causes of the fire have not been discovered. The possibility of sabotage is not excluded."

In all probability, the burning of the "Bremen" was the last act of the Anti-Fascist League organized by the International Association of Seamen's and Dockers' Unions. At the time of the formation of the League in 1935, this Association was one of the most active and widespread branch sections of the world union movement. The local organizations within it represented 22 independent countries and 19 colonies. In 47 large ports, this Association operated "interclubs" where, besides social and entertainment activities, intensive political work was carried out, especially among navigating personnel.

No wonder, therefore, that the initiative to form a league directed against Germany, Italy, and Japan, whose policies were aggressive, met such lively response among seamen and port workers. The majority of the active members of the League were German emigrants and Scandinavians--Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes. The League originally aimed at organizing boycotts and strikes against ships sailing under the flags of fascist states.

When, after the outbreak of the war in Spain, German and, later, also Italian ships began to provide Franco's army with a regular supply of weapons and military material and eventually transported "legionaries," the leadership of the League--Ernest Wollweber (present Minister of Security of East Germany), Sven Lasse, Linderroth, Waldemar Werner, and Adolf Baier--decided to expand the activities of the League

through diversion and sabotage against the shipping on the route from Germany to the Spanish ports. This activity was later extended to all shipping lines supplying the German armament industry.

The method generally used consisted in placing dynamite charges at the bottom of the ship, or in holds, preferably near the walls. The explosive charges were usually supplied with clock mechanisms which caused an explosion after departure from the port, when the most effective emergency measures for the ship became minimal. On the other hand, efforts were always made to assure the possibility of saving the crew and passengers.

The first results of the sabotage activity of organized seamen and dockers were the explosions on the Italian ship "Felice" which sank in Taranto Bay with a load of cars and other mechanical equipment, and on the Japanese ship "Tajima Maru," sunk during a trip to Germany after a short stop at Rotterdam. Next came the explosions on the German "Klas Boege," the Dutch "Westplein," the Japanese "KaziMaru," and the Romanian "Bossarabia".

Invaluable help was given to the League during this early period by a group of members of the Communist Party of Germany. This group, consisting of about 20 men and women, was headed by Dr. Michaelis. It was one of the few remaining organizations of the Communist Party of Germany to continue its activities despite the constantly increasing terror.

Hamburg Communists collected and passed on to League representatives all kinds of information concerning the German navigation lines, the departure times of ships, their loads, etc. Thanks to them, it was possible to compute so exactly the explosion of time bombs as to cause the greatest damage with the smallest number of victims. In 1937 the activity of this group was discovered by the Gestapo. Twelve of its members were condemned to death and others to long terms in prison.

After the outbreak of the war, conditions for the activities of the Anti-Fascist League became even more difficult. Information had to be passed on through special couriers at a time when the German ports were heavily guarded by hosts of secret agents. Under these circumstances, the activity of the League continued according to all the rules of conspiracy. All active members had at least one pseudonym, and complicated code words were also used. A shop in Paris was used to forge official papers. As a general rule, reports were written with an invisible ink made from lemon or onion juice.

"In order to get information we often had to go to Germany. When such was the case, the entire trip was planned

down to the minutest detail. For instance, at each place we stopped, we were to send a postcard to Denmark. An interruption in correspondence meant discovery, and another comrade then had to be sent." This is from the memoirs of Ignacy Mueller, one of the members of the League.

Shortly after the invasion of Denmark and Norway, German counter-intelligence succeeded in getting on the trail of the League. In connection with 23 bomb explosions on ships at Copenhagen, many seamen and port workers were arrested. In May 1940, the base of the activity of the League had to be moved to Sweden.

On the basis of an investigation, Heidrich, chief of the Central Security Office of the Reich, sent to Himmler on 10 August, 1940 a report which, among other things, contains the following: "The Communist terrorist groups stationed all over Europe must be held responsible for the sabotage committed against 16 German ships, thru Italian ships, and two Japanese ships. The best two of these vessels have been completely destroyed. At first these criminals tried to destroy ships by setting them on fire, but since this did not assure complete destruction, they have recently begun to use explosives... Their main bases are located at the ports of Hamburg, Bremen, Danzig, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Oslo, Tallinn, and Riga."

"The Sabotage groups formed in Holland, Belgium, and France operated under the direction of the Dutch Communist Jozef Rimbartus Schaap, director of the Interclub in Rotterdam. In Hamburg his direct subordinate was the former president of the Dockers' Union, Karol Bargstaedt, who was responsible for the technical aspect of the undertaking. The explosive materials needed for the criminal attempts were sent from Scandinavia in ore shipments...

"Police investigations have resulted in the capture of 24 Communist leaders, including a Dutch sabotage group, Achille Boguin, and the chief of the Belgian group, Alfons Fictels. Schaap was captured on 1 August in Copenhagen by the Danish police..."

During the peak period of German successes, Sweden constituted a difficult territory for underground activities directed against the Germans. The Swedish Government tried to avoid any conflict and not to give the Nazis any cause for complaint. When in June 1941, at one of the Swedish ports, an attempt--unfortunately unsuccessful--was made to blow up the Finnish ship "Figge," the Swedish police made many arrests. Some of the arrested persons were tried and given severe penalties. The last sabotage act carried out by the League was the burning of the "Bremen"

mentioned in the introduction.

The importance of the anti-fascist activity of seamen and dockers did not consist as much in dealing material losses to the Nazis and their allies--although these losses were unquestionably painful--as in accurately selecting a target and the time for its destruction. Thanks to the existence of a good intelligence and spy network, destruction or damages were always inflicted on a ship carrying the most valuable material, and at a time when it was difficult to replace either the ship or the equipment or raw material being transported. The Anti-Fascist League was one of the cogs of the wheel that systematically disorganized and destroyed the Nazi war machine.

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